

Uncle Wolf

by C V Ford

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Summary: He was cocoon born with the blackest of wings. As far as the Washi/Communicator could make out, had he not come to Gurie, he would have had much to answer for & a tremendous understatement at that

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><p>"Why are your wings so dark Uncle Wolf?"<p>

"Hachi!" The older Hana exclaimed. "You shouldn't ask questions like that!"

"I jus' wanna know ..."

Wolf smiled as he tucked the large sketchpad under his arm. Hachi being a new arrival of only three weeks & a young feather at that, it was only natural she would ask. As for him, he stopped letting it bother him long ago. A glance at his wings revealed to him their black mottled, gray scheme. An improvement (He hoped.) over what they were several years before.

Looking at the child he replied. "Well ... before I came here ... I must have been BAD, I guess."

"How bad!?"

"Hachi!"

"Why ... ALMOST as bad as ... ," he slowly turned in a crouch & pointed. "YOU!"

Another young feather, a boy this time, jumped back.

"No way!" The kid was smiling. He'd obviously been through this before. "I grew out nice charcoal grey feathers!"

"Stop it! NOW! All of you!"

Everyone looked up to see Hikari approaching from the kitchen.

"Awww ... Kids just being kids Hikari ..."

"Some of them BIG kids too!"

"I tried to stop it Hikari but ..."

"It's all right Hana. I heard everything." Half smiling, Hikari looked at Wolf. "It's almost time for their afternoon nap. You shouldn't get them so riled up."

"Just a little fun. I like kids ... sorry ... "

Hikari gave a little laugh. "You should be ... So ... leaving?"

"I have all the little details I need. I can start on the main event in a day or so. Besides ... If I stay any longer I'll be sketching portraits of everyone."

"Looks like you already have," Hikari noted looking at the thick sketchbook.

"That's probably what kept me here all yesterday too."

"That's exactly what it was! I saw ..."

"It's OK Hana. We know Wolf gets as much fun out of everything he can," the ponytailed blonde reassured. Looking back at Wolf, "they really like the drawings you made of them yesterday ... hung them all over the classroom. You DID get all the details you needed didn't you?"

"Took awhile ... but yes."

"With LOTS of interruptions?"

"Couldn't be helped ... They were all over me ..."

"They're more than a handful."

"By the way, thank you for the wonderful lunch."

"No trouble at all. I always like working with food. Makes me wish I was back at the bakery."

"Yes ... They miss you there. Like you said, these kids are more than a handful ... ," he said turning toward Gurie. "And with that ... I shall leave."

Saying their goodbyes, Wolf strode off in the direction of Gurie proper. It had been a wonderful day & a half of Autumn at Old Home. The young feathers weren't any trouble with their interrupting & he was more than happy for the distraction of drawing anything other than the task at hand. He was that good. A few days before, he was hit with an inspiration of how to commit the old dorm/fort to canvas. He would do it gratis, not as it was now or new, but before it started to fall apart. He would depict the crumbled wall as whole & other things not so dilapidated. As it was in its heyday, whatever purpose the place was originally for, no one knew. As were the past lives of individual Haibane, the group of buildings history was vague at best.

The towns' clock tower loomed in the distance. As he walked back to town he pondered the previous five years of his existence in this strange, walled-in shadowland.

He was cocoon born with the blackest of wings thus causing most at Abandoned Factory to shun him almost immediately. On his Acceptance at the temple the Washi informed him of his sinbound state. As far as the Communicator could make out, had he not come here, he would have had much to answer for & a tremendous understatement at that.

Suppressing an initial wave of rage & rebelliousness, he resolved if he couldn't atone for something he had no idea of, he would at least try to live a life different from before as far as he knew. Though not proud of his wings' coloration, he wouldn't hide it either. Even when later offered a temporary remedy from Old Home. He would walk in the light of day & having people accept him as he was ... chips falling where they may. It caused some strife at Abandoned Factory at first but as he stood up for himself, giving as good as he got & then some, the others grudgingly accepted him or steered clear.

Being an avid reader as well as a stickler for organisation & tidiness, he soon secured employment as an assistant librarian. The position vacated by an older Haibane of Old Home leaving to care for the young feathers due to another taking her Day of Flight.

He also found he had a more than adequate artistic talent. Though he dabbled in sculpture it was in drawing & painting he excelled. So much so, the sight of a black winged Haibane with sketchbook or easel became familiar in & around Gurie. Townsfolk on seeing his work, eventually came to him with commissions, a most welcome supplement to his librarians' wage. Mostly portraits & landscapes, several wall murals about town also attested to his skill.

He later took to frequenting the cafe & two taverns where he could be found in vigorous conversation over coffee (later beer) & checkers expounding about art, philosophy, & local affairs. So much had he become a local fixture, most everyone knew him by name. The children, Haibane & human alike, took to calling him Uncle Wolf.

His given name, reflecting his cocoon dream, was Suibou, meaning downfall ... ruin. Not caring for it he broke with tradition & settled on Worufu or Wolf. A name appealing to him for reasons he could not fathom but took to it he did.

The dream itself, now haunting him less, had him engaged in futile

warfare involving strange weapons & fantastic machines. It would be interspersed with visions of being before vast crowds or smaller groups of officious looking men, some in strange uniforms, speaking on the nature of struggle ... or of things darker. Like a former resident of Old Home, he painted some works having to do with his dream &, like the other, they were vague shadows at best ... of an even vaguer shadow.

In the middle of his third year he did something unprecedented for a Haibane, raising not a few eyebrows. He moved out of Abandoned Factory. Between his librarians' pay & artistic endeavors he was able to afford a modest three room flat above the thrift shop of which he made into his private studio. The Washi reluctantly allowed for this as it loosely fit that part of the Haibane creed about self reliance & non-dependance on the community.

On being warned by the communicator of the possibility of too much involvement in human affairs, Wolf assured him. He was well aware that aside from civil law & some social interaction, the ways of Haibane & human were mutually exclusive.

It was to his apartment he was now headed. To drop off his sketchwork before repairing to the cafe where he was sure a hot coffee & an even hotter game of checkers awaited. Instead of taking the outside steps up he decided on entry through the shop instead. Business to discuss.

Boroya & Wolf were friends long before their relationship of landlord/tenant began. The merchants' grandmother engaged Wolf in doing a canvas of the chapel where she was married long ago. Through old photographs supplied by Boroya & some research, Wolf decided on doing a bonus picture of the structures' interior as well ... Decked out as it had been on the day of the ceremony.

How the dear lady fretted over what she thought to be a long wait over a single painting. Wolf reassuring her it was well worth the wait. When she was presented with not one but two well executed works ... She was astounded to say the least.

He agonised over how much he should have charged but in the end, left it up to her as to their worth. Out of politeness, he refrained from even glancing at his pay-book & courteously took his leave. A couple blocks later with curiosity getting the better, he withdrew the booklet & looked.

After picking his jaw up from the pavement, he rushed back exclaiming she paid way too much. She insisted he earned every mite of it & wished she could pay more. He felt bad about it until Boroya later told him she could well afford it.

The amount would have kept him in rent & food for almost two months.

"Back so soon?" Asked the clothing monger on seeing the artist enter.

"Only needed to get a few more details down & that was it. I start on the canvas after work tomorrow. Right now, I think I owe you something."

"Yes," replied the landlord. "Tomorrow's the first of the month."

"There's also ... ," Wolf added pointing, "... that."

On the wall by the counter hung a large, like new uniform great coat of the kind worn by the gatekeepers. The portly former owner insisted it to be a size too small. Wolf felt it would make for an excellent overcoat for the soon to be winter.

"I noticed you had your eye on that for awhile." Boroya got the coat down handing it to the artist. "Here you go."

"And here YOU go," Wolf replied giving an already prepared sheet from his paybook, with rent & coat price scribbled on. Gathering it up, he headed for the stairs. "Just gonna drop everything off & I'm gone."

"Woah ... Wait a minute!"

"Oh?" Wolf turned back seeing the sheet handed back.

"You did it again."

"What the ... Oh geez! Just when I think I've stopped doing that, it happens again."

Taking the sheet he crossed out the errant signature. Entering the correct one, he handed it back.

In his dealings with the Haibane, Boroya knew more about them than most residents of the town. Sometimes even surprising Wolf with his knowledge.

"You know," he speculated looking at the first signature. "I still think this might have been your name before coming here. You must have signed a LOT of things with it for it to have ... uh ... 'followed' you."

"Nothing bad I hope."

"I wouldn't worry."

Boroya watched as the artist ascended the stairs, halo & black mottled gray wings swaying softly. Looking down at the sheet in his hand he contemplated the superceded mark.

"Curious name," he thought. "This ... A ... dolf ... What COULD it mean?"

He knew there was no way of knowing, not even by the Renmei itself. Deep down, something told him it was probably for the best that no one EVER could.

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